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POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION

BILL: HB 606 Criminal Procedure – Registered Sex Offenders – Residency Restrictions

FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender

POSITION: Unfavorable

DATE: February 11, 2022

The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Committee issue an unfavorable report on House Bill 606.

Sex offender registries not only fail to promote public safety, but also come at an extreme cost to the community, to individual registrants, and to their families. HB 606 expands upon the burden of those requirements placed upon sex offense registrants by creating another criminal charge based on a registrant moving to and residing within a certain distance of certain location. This legislation is not only ineffective but also ill-advised from both a public safety and a public policy standpoint.

Those convicted or accused of sexual offenses are some of the least likely to recidivate, yet face the most severe restrictions on their liberty following the completion of their sentences because of the registration requirements. This comes at great cost to both individual registrants (who face a lifetime of punishment on the sex offender registry) and the community, which must bear the costs of increased unemployment, homelessness, and other issues that come with the unnecessary, permanent social ostracization of this group. A 2019 Bureau of Justice Statistics report confirms that, within 9 years of release, less than 67% of people convicted of sexual assault were rearrested for any offense, making rearrest **20% less likely** for this group than all other offense categories combined (84%).¹ The same study also found that those convicted of rape or sexual assault were drastically less likely than other former offenders to commit the same crime again following release (7.7% as compared to 24% for property crimes, 18.5% for drug-related crimes, and 59% for “public order” crimes).

The restrictions and requirements of sex offender registration come at immense cost to individual registrants, law enforcement, and the community with minimal return. Many of those convicted of sex offenses are already barred from accessing public benefits, jobs, housing, services, and even many shelters, and thus are funneled into low-income neighborhoods or outright homelessness. Sex offender registries must also be monitored and maintained at great cost to the state and to law enforcement. Registration requires in-person check-ins, oversight of social media, electronic mail, home visits and verifications, vehicle registration and monitoring, electronic database maintenance, facilitation of public access to certain records, and much more. A 2009 study estimated that the cost to Maryland for first-year implementation

¹ Wendy Sawyer, *BJS Fuels Myths About Sex Offense Recidivism, Contradicting Its Own New Data*, PRISON POLICY GROUP, June 6, 2019, available at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/06/06/sexoffenses/>.

and compliance with the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act, a federal law setting baseline requirements for statewide registry systems, was \$9.1 million.² The registry does little (if anything) to prevent or treat the underlying causes of interpersonal violence, sexual abuse, and sexual assault. It comes at exorbitant cost to both law enforcement and the community. Sex offender registries are thus ineffective and ill-advised, from both a public safety and public policy standpoint. HB 606 is similarly ineffective as it just adds further criminal punishments on top of the registry requirements.

These registries are sold as a preventive tool; however, most sex offenses are committed by first-time offenders who are not on the registry. Obviously, the existence of the registry does nothing to prevent those crimes. A 2018 study examining the effect of Megan's Law in New Jersey concluded that legislation imposing registration “does not have a demonstrable effect on future offending.”³ A New York study similarly found no evidence that registration and notification laws were effective at reducing future sex crimes.⁴ A South Carolina study funded by the Department of Justice came to the same conclusion.⁵ Registration laws can actually make communities *less* safe in a variety of ways. Sex offender notification laws have been shown to increase recidivism among some sex offenders.⁶ Even for the vast majority of registrants who never commit another sex offense, the onerous restrictions described above impede stability, rehabilitation, and full reintegration into society, making them more likely to commit offenses related to survival. Finally, registration and notification laws put registrants at severe risk of becoming victims of vigilante violence and even murder.⁷

In addition to the general harms of sex offender registries, this legislation would also unnecessarily expand the punitive scope of registration by further restricting those registrants who have, despite the odds, found stable housing for themselves and their families. The proposed legislation would limit a registrant from residing within 1,000 feet of a variety of places, including schools and child care facilities but also parks, playgrounds, school bus stops, and the vague location “a place where children regularly congregate.” While the intent of the bill is of course aimed at the registrants, the proposed legislation would also limit the places where their children and families could live. Many of those forced to register are parents; if this bill became law, their children, already subject to public shaming for their parents’ registration status, could not live within a reasonable walking distance of the schools, parks, playgrounds, and even the school bus stops they need because their parents are already forbidden from accompanying them to those locations.

As public defenders, we have witnessed the lasting harms of the sex offender registry. Our office represented a man who had consensual sexual intercourse with a 13 year old when he was still a young adult. He pled guilty to 3rd degree sex offense and although he served a relatively short sentence, he was required to register as a sex offender for life. Once convicted, he could no longer reside with his family and struggled to find permanent housing. His status on the registry prevented him from working in his chosen field, even though that field required no contact with children. It also prohibited him from seeing his two children perform in the school play. More than a decade after he finished serving his sentence, he died alone in a motel of a heroin overdose.

² Justice Policy Institute, available at http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/08-08_fac_sornacosts_ji.pdf.

³ Kristen M. Zgoba, Wesley G. Jennings & Laura M. Salerno, *Megan's Law 20 Years Later: An Empirical Analysis and Policy Review*, 45 CRIM. JUST. & BEHAV. 1028, 1044 (2018).

⁴ See Jeffrey C. Sandler, Naomi J. Freeman & Kelly M. Socia, *Does a Watched Pot Boil?: A Time-Series Analysis of New York State's Sex Offender Registration and Notification Law*, 14 PSYCH. PUB. POL'Y & L. 284, 284 (2008).

⁵ Elizabeth J. Letourneau et al., *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Sex Offender Registration and Notification Policies for Reducing Sexual Violence against Women*, Med. U. S.C., at 3-4 (Sept. 2010).

⁶ J.J. Prescott & Jonah E. Rockoff, *Do Sex Offender Registration and Notification Laws Affect Criminal Behavior?*, 54 J.L. & Econ. 161, 192 (2011).

⁷ Rob Csernyik, *How Sex Offender Registries Can Result in Vigilante Murder*, VICE, March 28, 2018, available at <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ne9ew7/how-sex-offender-registries-can-result-in-vigilante-murder>.

Maryland's registration statute also criminalizes and punishes what should otherwise be considered reform-minded and productive behavior in society. Take, for example, the case of William.⁸ William pled and was convicted of a third degree sexual offense which, unbeknownst to him at the time, resulted in lifetime registry as a Tier III offender. William completed a lengthy prison sentence, successfully completed a five-year term of sex offender probation (which included polygraph examinations, a year-long treatment course, and very stringent reporting requirements), and started a new life. He got a job, started a family, and got a house. He did all of the things that society would strive and demand someone achieve after satisfying the punitive aspect of a sentence.

He also started registering as a sex offender. He would check in with the police every six months, as mandated by law. Over the course of 15 years, he never missed a date: never failed to report a new car, an email address, a social media account--all of the myriad requirements that are demanded of this group. Then, one day, he got a call from his children's school, asking if he would attend a meeting regarding his daughter's academic progress. His daughter had been struggling, but of late was earning straight A's, and the teaching staff wanted to take the moment to commend her achievement while also planning for the future. William was proud, and excited to attend. On the day of the meeting, he arrived early, showed and scanned his ID at the front door, and was welcomed into the meeting. Then, within a few minutes, a man came in and told him he needed to leave. "There are certain laws," the man said, that prevented his participation in the meeting, despite his invitation to the same. William made one mistake--one mistake in 15 years--and because of that, he was charged, prosecuted, and faced a three-year maximum penalty for violating Maryland's registration laws: for doing everything we would want a good parent to do. Suddenly, everything was at risk again, his job, his home, and access to his family.

We mention William's case, not because it is an anomaly, but because it is the norm. The registration statute is already overbroad, overpunitive, and overreaching. This is why we oppose HB606 and any effort to expand registration requirements or expansion of criminal punishments focused on registrant requirements. People like William deserve to be good parents to their children, and to be productive members of society.

For these reasons, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to issue an unfavorable report on HB 606.

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⁸ All names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the parties' privacy.